

17 February 1984

NUCLEAR WAR/  
WARNING SYSTEM

RATHER: While political and scientific debate goes on how best to prevent the nightmare of nuclear war, probably most of us assume that should the worst happen there will at least be an attack warning. In fact, there is such a warning system, the National Attack Warning System, NAWAS for short. And the long and short of Bob Simon's investigation of that system is NAWAS is a well-kept secret, even from the top and agencies it's supposed to be warning. And that's just for openers.

SIMON: NORAD, carved deep into the Colorado's Rocky Mountains, nucleus of the nation's defense network, also home of the National Attack Warning System, NAWAS. If missiles or war planes are heading for the United States, NAWAS will know; NAWAS will tell you. UNIDENTIFIED VOICE FROM COMPUTER: In the event of an enemy attack we're ready to provide warning.

SIMON: But if anything happens to Colorado, NAWAS has a twin sister 1,600 miles away just outside the nation's capital, buried beneath a pasture like a terrestrial submarine, its electronic periscope probing the atmosphere. The bunker is in Maryland. The system is tested here once a month, one man, one telephone dial direct to a system of sirens strategically sited throughout the capital. And another fail-safe fallback, bells and lights at key buildings, the White House, the houses of Congress. It is February 1984, 10 seconds before 11:00 a.m. The attack warning officer prepares for the test. (Footage of unidentified man dialing telephone to test warning system and showing sirens failing to sound and lights failing to light) UNIDENTIFIED MALE (On telephone): Ah, I have a, ah, have an indication here that the, ah, the system did not operate.

SIMON: An indication--no bells, no lights. Sirens? Not sure, can't hear them down here. It took 15 minutes to hear from the outside world that there had been... UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Complete system failure.

SIMON: Twenty minutes after the first hypothetical missiles would have been spotted, duty officer Don Gardner was on the phone to headquarters, to the chief. DON GARDNER: Ah, I talked to his secretary. And she didn't wanna interrupt him on the telephone.

SIMON: Cut off from HQ, the duty officers could only guess what had gone wrong with the nation's nuclear warning system. UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I suspect that the problem lies a, ah, telephone company's central office.

**CONTINUED**

SIMON: The trouble was at the phone company. VOICE OF BILL TOOMEY (A&P Telephone): We received a, ah, office alarm and isolated it into that cable pair.

SIMON: But they didn't know that down in the bunker, where 34 minutes after the test began officer Gardner. finally got a hold of the chief, Ken White. GARDNER: Ken, this is Don at the warning center in Olney. Ah, we had a massive failure of the bell and light and the, ah, siren test today. Ah, CBS was here at the time. Yes, they got it all.

SIMON: But what did Mr. White have to say? KEN WHITE: That's true. It was about 25-plus minutes before they was able to reach me. Ah, I was, at the time of their initial call, in a conference.

SIMON: Did the bells ring? Did the lights blink anywhere? GARDNER (On telephone): CIA? Today was our scheduled bell and light test. Did it go off at your location? Thank you. (Hanging up telephone) It didn't go off at CIA.

SIMON: The CIA knew that the system had failed. The House of Representatives did not know there was a system. But then, Gardner made the most important call of all. GARDNER (On telephone): We have a scheduled test today at 11:00, your bell and light system. Your bell and light system. Do you know what the bell and light system is? It's the attack warning or civil defense warning for the.... Yeah. Are you familiar with that? Nobody seems to know. OK. Thank you very much, Mr. Robinson. Nobody seems to know.

SIMON: Washington officials point out that had this been a real emergency, other warning systems would have come into play. They admit that these bells and lights and sirens are a bit antiquated and will be replaced. But until that day, the men of NAWAS will protect this nation with what they've got. Bob Simon, CBS News, Washington.